GARRAN ORATION

Reinvigorating the Australian Project

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I want to begin by introducing something called the 'Australian project', and suggesting how we as a nation can draw upon the successes of our past to inspire and guide us in the future. Few individuals in our history played a more important part in the first phase of the Australian project than Sir Robert Garran. Garran was our first public servant, the co-author of our leading constitutional text, an advocate before the Privy Council, and a passionate Canberran. He was a key participant in the peace talks that followed Armistice Day 1918, and in the industrial relations turmoil of the 1920s. Garran helped forge many institutions that are still with us, and left many ideas that we have yet to pick up.

Much of what I say will be drawn from *Imagining Australia: Ideas for Our Future*, a book co-authored with Macgregor Duncan, David Madden and Peter Tynan (2004). To begin, let me outline what I mean by the Australian project.

When people decided to come to Australia in the nineteenth century, many believed they were coming to partake in something greater than themselves. They felt that Australia was an experiment. It was an experiment based on optimism and opportunity. Indeed, Manning Clark, our greatest national historian, once said that Australia was an experiment for the multiple faiths of the Holy Spirit, the Enlightenment and a New Britannia. So you get the sense that in these early days, the Australian project was one of expansiveness, enlargement and possibility, where people were prepared to take risks and try new ideas in an effort to show that in Australia we did things differently, and better, than elsewhere around the world.

This Australian project is not finished. It is not something that stopped on 1 January 1901, when Robert Garran's visionary work to forge the new Australian nation came to fruition. And it did not end with the First World War or with the death of Ben Chifley. The Australian project is an ongoing experiment. And all of us, as today's Australians, are the custodians of this project, a project that stretches back over generations and centuries, and binds all Australians, past, present and future, together in this greater cause. We have a responsibility to make sure that the Australian project, for the time that it rests in our hands, is advanced and continued.

But many of us also have this sense that for all our success and potential—and we really are a fantastically successful country—that this Australian project has somewhat lost its way. Australia is like the Mark Waugh of nations: succeeding effortlessly, occasionally brilliant, but always frustrating the fans with our unwillingness to live up to our potential and our talents. But it is important that Australia does live up to its potential. And it is important that we make as good a go of our country as we possibly can. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to those Australians who came before us and to those who will follow.

To do this Australia needs both vision and ideas. The great Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin once remarked that people could be divided into two categories: the hedgehogs and the foxes. The hedgehogs, he said, know just one big thing; they understand the world through a single grand vision. The foxes on the other hand, they are the detail people, who know many things about one particular topic. Yet too often in Australia, we see the hedgehogs and the foxes talking past one another.

In *Imagining Australia* we endeavour to marry the hedgehogs and the foxes; to focus on some big challenges, but also to present practical policy proposals that might make them a reality. *Imagining Australia* covers a lot of ground, so I have chosen to focus here on four issues that have been largely absent from the political arena

Australian Journal of Public Administration • 64(1):3-7, March 2005

over the last year: inequality, reconciliation, developing a stronger public service, and revitalising our polity and our public discourse.

The first challenge is to begin a real debate about inequality. During the 1990s, average incomes rose rapidly, boosting living standards for most Australians. But the fraction of income going to the richest 1 percent rose too – from 6 percent to 9 percent. A a typical CEO in one of Australia's top 50 companies earned 22 times the wage of an average worker in 1992, but 74 times the wage of an average worker in 2002 – more than a threefold increase in just a decade (Atkinson and Leigh 2004).

Inequality matters for a set of pragmatic reasons. More unequal societies tend to be less trusting, have higher crime rates, and have lower health standards. Unequal countries also tend to have more polarised political systems. Inequality also matters in a deeper sense. The widening gulf between rich and poor in Australia ultimately strains our social fabric – as the two groups come to occupy fundamentally different worlds, rarely coming into contact with one another. Rather than ignoring inequality, or pretending that it does not matter, it is time for Australian politicians to engage in an open and honest discussion about how much inequality we wish to bear.

Then, if we decide as a society to devote a larger share of our national pie towards the poorest, we must engage in what Franklin D. Roosevelt once called 'bold, persistent experimentation', testing antipoverty programs in randomised trials just as we test new pharmaceuticals(Leigh 2003) Put to the test, many of the programs favoured by both sides of politics might well be found to be ineffective, and have to be abandoned. This would be a good thing

What we need in social policy today is not more ideologues, convinced that their policy prescriptions are the answer, but modest reformers willing to try new solutions, and see whether they actually deliver results. We probably know as much today about how to achieve full employment or bring indigenous living standards up to the level of non-indigenous living standards as we do about how to cure cancer or AIDS. So as the medical researchers do, we should rigorously trial new programs, expecting most to have no effect, but being willing to learn from our failures. There is no contradiction between being optimistic about the ends, yet scientific and critical about the means.

The second challenge is to achieve a lasting reconciliation with the nation's original inhabitants. Perhaps the toughest problem facing Australia today, achieving reconciliation has eluded political leaders for a generation. Today, there is a risk that reconciliation will languish, supplanted by more immediate issues. As we all know in our daily lives, it's easy to let the most urgent tasks take over from the most important ones.

Yet reconciliation is not insoluble, and we cannot afford to leave it on the back-burner. A way forward is to make reconciliation more celebratory, improving understanding of Indigenous stories and languages, rather than focusing exclusively on past injustices. Reconciliation works best when it offers hope and promise. One of the best examples of this was the Sydney 2000 Olympics, where the torch made its way from Nova Peris-Kneebone at Uluru to Cathy Freeman lighting the flame, Yothu Yindi played Treaty, and Indigenous stories were integrated with present day Australia. Australians must know the wrongs that were committed, but reconciliation will never work as a self-flagellating exercise. The real challenge of reconciliation is not to win the hearts of the people of Paddington or Carlton, but to forge a message that will resonate with suburban Australia. Every Australian parent should be able to tell Aboriginal stories to their children, and should know the history of indigenous groups in their local regions.

Simple symbolic changes can help too. We ought to celebrate June 3, the day on which the High Court's Mabo judgment was handed down, as Eddie Mabo Day. We should assign dual names to capital cities, as the New Zealanders do, calling Melbourne also Narloke or Narrm; Sydney also Werrong or Cadi. And we should set a time frame – perhaps 5 years – and tackle a Treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. Australia should no longer be the only Commonwealth country without a treaty with its original inhabitants. In this, there is nothing to fear. As Mick Dodson, Indigenous Professor of Law at the Australian National University points out, 'If the blackfellas don't

like what's in it they won't agree to it, and if the whitefellas don't like it, they won't agree.'

If we as a nation achieve successes in areas like inequality and reconciliation, it will be thanks in large part to the hard work of our public service. Australia is fortunate to have one of the great public services in the world, with a history of policy vigour and creativity. As someone who works in the HC Coombs building at the Australian National University, now delivering the Garran Oration, I would be ill-advised to comment on the age-old debate over who was our greatest ever public servant. But it is certain that Australia would be something less than it is today had it not been for individuals such as Robert Garran, Nugget Coombs, John Crawford, Leslie Melville, Roland Wilson and Peter Wilenski.

Over the past two decades, the Australian public service has undergone major institutional reforms. Much of this change has focused on downsizing, streamlining and adopting better management practices. As a fraction of the country's population, the federal bureaucracy today is half the size that it was twenty years ago. Initiatives like performance pay have transformed the public service into a more efficient, flexible and responsive institution—although there are some justifiable concerns about the politicisation of the service. But there is still room for improving the vigour and dynamism of the public service today. Developing innovative yet rigorous policy, challenging established norms and acting boldly in imagining a future Australia must be the new mandate.

The notion of bold, innovative public servants may strike some as contrary to the fundamental principles of an impartial bureaucracy. As Lord Bancroft (1983) the head of the British civil service in the late-1970s, put it: 'Conviction politicians, certainly; conviction civil servants, no'.Yet to a large extent, Australia's successes have come because we had 'conviction civil servants' – prepared to make the case for change to the political leadership of the day.

One way to ensure that this tradition endures is to broaden the experience base of the public service. A more porous public service, where mobility between departments and non-government sectors is seen as career-enhancing, should be promoted. Experience gained in business or community sector organisations should be viewed as an integral part of a public servant's professional development. A deep understanding of the way in which public policy affects society is essential for improving public policy.

Another option would be to turn the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), which opened its doors in 2003, into the region's pre-eminent government school, analogous to the Australian Graduate School of Management. Such a school, if adequately funded and given its own permanent home, would promote cutting-edge thinking across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries, and encourage a culture of public service excellence. Unfortunately, ANZSOG is currently only admitting Australian federal and State public servants. A much broader admissions policy should be adopted.

The benefits of greater diversity are manifest. A business leader who has served as a diplomat is more likely to encourage her company to sell its products overseas. A bureaucrat who once started his own company is more likely to understand what government can do to foster innovation. A community activist who has spent time as a State public servant knows how to press for reform. All three make for a healthier, more robust civic society and democracy.

Greater movement between academia and policymaking should also be encouraged. One example is the US Council of Economic Advisers, staffed by academics seconded for a year from the best universities in America. At present, in Australia, there is little scope for academics to serve for a year or two in the public service or to work directly for a Cabinet minister. Indeed, neither government nor universities facilitate such mobility. The result is that politics misses out on the knowledge and ideas of the most talented academics, while universities forgo the opportunity to have faculty members with a strong grounding in applied policymaking.

Academia, bureaucrats and politicians can work together in other ways too. Australia's new politicians training was conducted in November 2004 his week in Parliament House - focusing solely on parliamentary procedure. By contrast,

Harvard University every two years runs a much broader course for New Members of Congress, designed to familiarise new federal politicians with the long-term policy challenges that the nation confronts – financing retirement with an aging population, understanding the Kyoto protocol and the McKibbin-Wilcoxen model, getting to grips with the revolution in military affairs. Together, an Australian university and relevant bureaucratic experts could do the same, not with the goal of persuading politicians to adopt one side or another of a debate, but to ensure that they have the basic facts to participate in the complex but critical debates that lie ahead.

Lastly, it is time to revitalise the public debate. Today, Australia's polity is in disrepair. The proportion of the population who are members of a political party has dropped from 3 percent to around 1½ percent – despite the occasional branch-stacking. As Liberal politician Chris Puplick once wrote, the risk is that the only ones left in our political parties 'the mad, the lonely and the ambitious'. As parties fade into irrelevance, the business of candidate selection is increasingly being taken over by head offices and powerbrokers. The process of selecting members of parliament – and sometimes even members of the frontbench – is too important to be decided by party apparatchiks and factional warlords.

In the broader community, the problems are similar. The fraction of Australians who agree that their politicians are ethical and honest has fallen from one-in-five in the 1970s to one-in-ten today. In the 1960s, half the population agreed that 'people in government can be trusted'. Today, only one-third do. In 2002, when I co-edited a book on trust in politicians, our publisher thought the situation was so bad that the cover illustration they chose was of one dog sniffing another's backside (Burchell and Leigh 2002).

Part of the problem may be that many people feel locked out of public debate in Australia today. In *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, Mark Davis wrote of what he called the 'gerrymander of the ideas market' in Australia, arguing that many of the main players in the media game have simply 'been breathing each other's air for too long' (Davis 1999). Media diversity means more than who owns the company; it also means bringing new voices into the airwaves and onto the broadsheets – more of Isaiah Berlin's hedgehogs and foxes.

How can we involve more people in politics and public debate? How can we make public policy sexy again? As the one-time chairman of the Commonwealth Book Censorship Board, Robert Garran would probably not have put it quite that way, but he did offer us an answer. Drawing on his experience in the 1890s, Garran proposed that an elected convention should periodically review our constitution. Just as Thomas Jefferson had argued a century earlier, Garran's proposal acknowledged that a Constitution is a living document, which must be brought up to date by each generation of Australians. Is it crazy to think that constitutional conventions can help to reinvigorate our polity? The best proof lies in the 1998 Constitutional Convention, focused on whether we wanted to become a republic, and if so, what model should be adopted. The 1998 Convention not only got Australians talking about the republic, but also brought a bright new crop of individuals onto the national stage.

In the future, constitutional conventions might be held every ten years. At their conclusion, the delegates might present a number of options to the government for reform of the Constitution. The government would then make a decision as to whether to submit any such proposals to parliament, and parliament might in turn put them to referendum. Garran and Jefferson were instrumental in drafting their nations' founding documents, but neither thought that their words should last forever. Regular constitutional conventions would bring the Constitution in from the cold and heighten the awareness of the Australian public of our most fundamental text.

Another way to heighten the level of citizen participation and awareness would be to create a national deliberation day – an annual national holiday one week before the fixed date for major national elections, where registered voters come together to discuss the central issues raised by the campaign. The notion of a deliberation day draws on the work of US professors Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2002). Voters would assemble in groups of, say, 500 people, at specified locations within their local

neighbourhoods—schools, churches or community centres. The group would watch a live telecast debate between the main candidates in the forthcoming election: for example, the prime ministerial candidates in a House of Representatives election. Voters would then split into groups of about fifteen, in order to facilitate face-to-face discussions. Each participant would be given a certain amount of time to raise issues and make comments. Later citizens would reassemble into the large group for a question-and-answer session with local decision-makers and representatives of the parties.

Deliberation day would make a significant contribution to the life and fabric of Australian democracy, and an innovative step forward in our civic life. With time, it would hopefully be embraced by all Australians. It may seem radical now, but probably no more radical than other Australian democratic innovations did at the time. Giving the right to vote to women, implementing the secret ballot, or requiring compulsory voting are all reforms that seemed radical at the time, but are now accepted as part of the modern Australian democratic fabric.

I have talked about only a few of the ways in which the Australian project might be reinvigorated – by placing inequality and reconciliation squarely on the national agenda, and by finding creative ways to energise our bureaucracy and revitalising our public debate. But the broader point that I want to make is that we should all see ourselves as playing a role in defining and contributing to the direction of our country. In the future, the great Australian dream should not merely be to own a home, but to actively contribute to building a better nation.

In 1966, addressing the University of Capetown, Robert F Kennedy said that the world 'demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind; a temper of the will'. The Australian project too is a youthful project – not because its champions must themselves be young, but because it requires a youthful temper of the will. It requires politicians to focus our attention on a goal larger than self-interest, and go beyond the politics of the hip pocket nerve. The Australian project was born of altruism, and its rebirth today requires a sense of optimism, and a willingness to do our part – for the brief time that the Australian project rests in our hands.

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THE GARRAN ORATION

The Sir Robert Garran Oration was established by the ACT Division of IPAA in 1959 to honour the memory of the first, and one of the greatest Commonwealth public servants.

On the inauguration of the Commonwealth on 1 January 1901, Sir Robert Garran became Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department and Parliamentary Draftsman. Alfred Deakin was his first Ministerial chief and together they set about laying the statutory basis of Federal government. Sir Robert filled many offices, both governmental and non-official, to the enrichment of Australian life. He was one of the founders of the University College and of the Australian National University and of many community organizations in Canberra. He was a classical scholar as well as a master of several languages and he was a keen musician and author.